



Date: 19<sup>th</sup> & 26<sup>th</sup> January 2025

Theme: Christian Unity

Bible Readings: John 17:20-23  
and Ephesians 4:1-6

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## PREPARATION FOR GROUP LEADERS

Please remember to contact your group beforehand to remind them of date and time of the meeting, and make yourself familiar with all the material and Bible passages. Also, hold in prayer each member of your group during the week before the session.

## PREPARATION FOR ALL PARTICIPANTS

Traditionally, the **Week of Prayer for Christian Unity** is 18<sup>th</sup> - 25<sup>th</sup> January each year (although some areas observe it around Pentecost). It started in 1908, and is organised by the **World Council of Churches**, with local **Churches Together** groups encouraged to bring Christians together in prayer and worship. Please see the notices in your own church for details of any events in your area and support these events if you are able, or hold churches and Christians from other denominations in prayer.

Please read **John 17:20-23** and **Ephesians 4:1-6**, which are the main Bible passages that we shall be considering in this session. You may find it helpful to read all of **John 17**, giving the whole prayer that Jesus prayed with (and for) his disciples in the upper room on the evening before his death on the cross. (You might also like to read the background information over the page.)

## STARTING THE SESSION: A PRAYER

Almighty God,  
in a world divided by so many things and becoming increasingly dangerous,  
we pray that your Church on earth is drawn closer together in genuine unity –  
supporting one another, encouraging one another and, as appropriate, working together.  
We pray for the work of Churches Together,  
particularly those projects where Christians work together in caring for people in our community,  
showing what it truly means to be disciples of Jesus.  
May your Holy Spirit guide us in this session together, towards closer unity with you and one another.  
In the name of Jesus Christ, our Lord. **Amen.**

## FINDING OUR ROOTS

In groups of 3 or 4 people, please read **John 13:34-35** and discuss the following:

Jesus gives a new command to love one another, not only to his disciples present then but disciples for all time. *Should obedience to this command lead to Christian unity and, if so, how? How would you define 'unity'?*

Jesus stated that the result of obeying this should be that all will know that we are Jesus' disciples, perhaps earning the respect of non-Christians. *Does the work of Churches Together facilitate this? And what are your own experiences of Churches Together?*

## READING THE SCRIPTURES - with background information

**Read together [John 17:20-23](#).** Jesus' prayer on the evening before his death on the cross is very different from the prayers recorded in the other three Gospels where Jesus goes off on his own to pray in the Garden of Gethsemane. In John's Gospel, this prayer is prayed by Jesus in the presence of his closest disciples following his intensive teaching of his disciples, aimed largely at preparing them for the time very soon when he would not be with them in person ([chapters 13-17](#)). In the final part of this heart-felt prayer, he prays for all believers of all time, including us today. Included in verse 22 are the key words "*may they be one*" which can be linked to the new command that Jesus gave earlier that evening "*Love one another*".

**Read together [Ephesians 4:1-6](#).** Paul clearly tried to follow Jesus' command and prayer on unity. He had great challenges in uniting the new churches which contained people of very different backgrounds, including Jews and Gentiles; slaves and free; rich and poor. Paul stressed that Jesus Christ was head of the Church (not Paul, Peter or any other earthly leader) and that the Church had one Lord, one Spirit, one faith, one baptism, and one God. Paul was very single-minded and would allow nothing to detract from proclaiming the one true Gospel.

**Christian Unity over the last 2000 years.** For the first thousand years, the Christian church was not without its problems and controversies, but remained united as one body, held together by historic practices and creeds, such as the [Nicene Creed](#) (which is 1700 years old this year). Since the '**Great Schism**' of East and West in **1054**, however, Christian unity has generally suffered, and churches and leaders have performed badly in this respect, leading to horrific divisions and even bloodshed between factions. Thankfully, the relationship between Christian denominations has gradually improved over the last 100 years or so, with a growing ecumenical movement. **The Week of Prayer for Christian Unity** started in 1908 and has grown in support. Areas were encouraged to form Councils of Churches in the 1920's, succeeded in 1990 by **Churches Together**, when a covenant was signed between most major denominations, resulting in Christians working together in devotion, fellowship and outreach. Since then, many excellent projects have been started aimed at meeting the needs of local communities. But divisions of theology and practice divisions still exist between churches and even within denominations.

## DIGGING DEEPER

Discuss the following questions together, allowing everyone time and space to share their views:

*Why do you think Jesus attached such importance to all believers being "being brought to complete unity" ([John 17:23](#))? How do you think Jesus feels about disharmony and enmity within his church?*

*What advice was Paul giving the Church in Ephesus about maintaining unity ([Ephesians 4:1-6](#))? What difficulties do you think Paul may have encountered in seeing that churches followed his advice?*

*What challenges do you think Paul had in establishing new churches and keeping them running effectively? Do churches today have similar or different challenges? Which ones are you aware of?*

*How has [Churches Together](#) contributed positively to Christian unity, or to you personally? You may care to share your experiences of working and worshipping with Christians of other denominations.*

*Serious disagreements sometimes happen between churches, and within churches. What advice would you give for handling differences or finding reconciliation? How can we learn to see our differences more positively? Can a church exist in unity and also cherish diversity?*

## PRAYING TOGETHER

In a time of sharing or open prayer, thank God for this opportunity to learn and grow together, and hold before God any person or situation on your hearts.

Pray for your local *Churches Together* group, for the churches and ministers in your community, and especially for any ecumenical projects or organisations showing how disciples can work together.

As a prayer, say or [sing together](#) Charles Wesley's hymn: "[All praise to our redeeming Lord](#)" (*Singing the Faith*, 608). Then, say together **the Lord's Prayer**.